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**Testimony before the  
Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development  
and Research of the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture**

**Agriculture Conservation Programs in Hawai'i**

**April 8, 2004**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

It is a privilege to be able to testify before your Subcommittee; thank you for this opportunity to describe our efforts here in Hawai'i to develop and diversify our agricultural sector and to suggest how we might partner with the federal government.

The protection of agricultural lands and support for a vibrant agricultural sector are crucial to building a sustainable economy, ensuring self-sufficiency and food security and maintaining a high quality of life in Hawai'i. As an island state, Hawai'i's economy and general well-being are uniquely vulnerable to outside forces in proportion to our dependence upon the importation of goods to our shores. By some measures, that importation of food and other goods stands at 90%. An increase in locally produced food, as well as locally grown energy crops (biofuels), will provide greater security to Hawai'i and make the state less vulnerable to externally driven price increases, especially for food and fuel. Increased agricultural production, whether for local use or for export, will further diversify and thereby strengthen Hawai'i's economy.

Over the past year, a broad group of people came together as a statewide Agricultural Working Group to consider how best to protect important agricultural lands and ensure the long-term viability of agriculture in Hawai'i. Hawai'i's agricultural sector is in the process of transition from a former plantation agriculture focused upon a few crops to an agricultural sector with vastly greater diversity of products. At the same time, interest in the residential development of agricultural lands has increased over the past decade and could result in the loss of significant amounts of prime agricultural land. For Hawai'i to be able to develop a vigorous diversified agricultural industry, it needs to preserve its resource base of prime agricultural lands.

We recognize that federal agricultural conservation programs are playing an important role nationwide in the preservation of agricultural lands and agricultural production. Hawai'i would like to benefit from those programs. We are particularly interested in the protection of agricultural lands through the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program. In order for Hawai'i to take advantage of this program, Hawai'i must have in place local matching funding to utilize this program.

The Agricultural Working Group proposed legislation that is being considered at the State Legislature this session. One aspect of the legislation is the formation of a state "Agricultural land protection program" which, if enacted, will purchase and accept donations of easements on lands identified as important agricultural lands. This program could work in concert with the federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program to ensure the protection of important agricultural lands.

The four counties that make up Hawai'i could also provide local matching funds. I am proud to say that the voters of Kaua'i in 2002 approved an open space/public access charter amendment which sets aside a half percent (1/2%) of real property tax revenues for open space acquisition, which includes preservation of agricultural lands. To the extent that the target lands are also prime agricultural lands, our fund could provide such a match.

The agricultural lands protection legislation which is pending before the State Legislature would also mandate the various counties to each identify the respective prime agricultural lands within their jurisdictions. The intent of the bill is to identify those lands so they can be protected. The Federal Farm and Ranch Protection Program would give the counties a critical tool by which to actually accomplish such protection.

We greatly appreciate the partnership of the Congress, in particular, your Subcommittee, in our efforts.